

Diminishing political power in Westminster means politicians need to take a new approach to how they make a name for themselves



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36 > The dwindling power of Parliament

38 > **OPINION: In defence of politics** 39 > Digging for gold on the internet

40 > **Localism versus growth** 41 > The myth of the Brussels bureaucrats

42 > **Net effect** 43 > The value of value-based regulation 43 > **Criteria for citizenship**

44 > **OPINION: An unpopular alliance** 45 > **The need to know** 46 > The politics of food production 47 > **Making faith matter in the European Union** 48 > Peer pressure



The pressures on modern prime ministers such as David Cameron differ greatly from those in previous administrations

The dwindling power of Parliament

Martin Ince talks to Professor Anthony King about whether governments attempt too much, and what might make them more effective

EIGHTEEN MONTHS INTO Britain's first coalition government in living memory, how are David Cameron and colleagues coping with riots, financial crises, wars and the Arab Spring? For an informed opinion, it would be hard to find anyone more suitable than Anthony King, Professor of Government at the University of Essex since 1969, who has probably observed more British governments in action than any other expert alive.

Professor King is complimentary about one aspect of the current administration. It has not been held back by being a coalition. Indeed, he says, "Looking at it from the outside, it would be hard to tell it was a coalition if one did not know already. The major parties in this country are already coalitions of differing interests. Harold Wilson and John Major had more trouble running one-party governments with small majorities



than Cameron is having with the coalition.” He also points out that some governments do achieve what they set out to. The Attlee government from 1945 “had a manifesto which set out accurately what happened”. And the Thatcher government “curbed the power of the unions and privatised most of the state-owned industries within a few years”.

But such success is rare and the reason is simple – the sheer complexity of modern government. “No one individual can initiate and implement policy effectively, because the power of the British prime minister is grossly overstated. Blair forced through the invasion of Iraq, but that was a rarity. Being prime minister is not like being head of a corporation with a range of departments that report to you. It’s more like being Secretary General of the UN and having to get rival nations to agree on a course of action.”

Professor King adds that governments make life more difficult for themselves by trying to do too much. “It is impossible for politicians to make their name by running a department efficiently,” he says. “They have to become known for innovation and new ideas. The pressure is made worse by the fact that we now have an ambitious political class whose members have never worked outside politics, the media or public relations. Their interests and the long-term national interest may not always coincide.”

LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP

This feeds into Professor King’s favourite idea for improving British politics: “Not a legislative change but a cultural one.” He suggests that we adopt a system by which we can “look before we leap”. At the moment, he explains, “There is a deficit of deliberation in the British system and people do not stop and think. Partly this is because Parliament is a reactive body with little influence on policy. If it had public hearings on planned legislation, poor ideas, like the poll tax in the 1980s, would never be enacted.” Professor King also believes that we have yet to grasp how far the power available to Westminster has dwindled over time.

“Since the start of the First World War, Britain has lost its empire and its economic dominance. But more recently, devolution means that Westminster has lost far more power than is generally realised,” he says. “When you speak of the National Health Service now, the ‘nation’ in question is England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, not Britain.” The government in London has also ceded control over university fees and over key levers such as the ability to promote nuclear power. And court decisions retain the power to frustrate government intentions.

He also points out that British policy has always been affected by the outside world. “The fall of the Labour government in 1931 was precipitated by the collapse of an Austrian bank, much as the current crisis dates back to the fall of Lehman Brothers.” In the modern era, says Professor King, “few government departments can do much without reference to Europe”. But he rejects the idea that ‘Brussels’ is taking over in some unaccountable way. Instead, “it has always been accepted that the major nations, including Britain, have a block on any big decision”.

In general, he is more worried about the internal problems of British government than the pressures it feels from outside. A significant constraint on the effectiveness of any organisation is the quality of the people it has working for it. Professor King fears that twin pressures may reduce the capacity of the British civil service to carry through government plans. First, other professional

avenues such as the City and the law may now be attracting high-fliers who once headed for public service. Second, the sheer turnover of staff in important posts. “Once, an incoming minister would be briefed by civil servants who had been in the ministry for years. Now they are both likely to be new to the job.”

By contrast, he says, it is rare for public opinion to have much of an effect on government. There can be rare exceptions, such as drugs policy, which is driven by what governments believe to be public revulsion against illicit drugs. But the way in which public spending cuts are now being pushed through in the teeth of public opposition is more typical. More damaging than public opinion to the course of good government, he thinks, is the sheer clutter of political life. The pressure to be visible to the media “uses up time and nervous energy that could be used in other ways”. In addition, there is the constant flow of what Prime Minister Harold Macmillan famously termed “events, dear boy, events”. Libya is a current case in point. “When he took office, David Cameron cannot have imagined that Libya would be using a lot of his time a year later. Even a decision not to get involved is time-consuming.”

People no longer know who is in charge, because of the loss of power to devolution, Europe and the courts

Politicians also get less rest than they once did. “In the past, prime ministers used to vanish for up to a month on holiday, and would not come back to deal with emergencies like Cameron did with the riots.”

LOSS OF EFFECTIVENESS

Professor King says that he “no longer holds the British political system in the high esteem” that he once did. “I used to think that it was accountable to the electorate: they knew who the rascals were and how to get rid of them. And I thought it dealt effectively with important problems. But people no longer know who is in charge, because of the loss of power to devolution, Europe and the courts. I have not regarded British governments as effective for some time. They have not dealt with issues such as the ageing population or Britain’s need for an appropriately educated workforce.”

Asked who does things better than the British, Professor King declares himself impressed with the nations of northwest Europe. “If our system were recast I would make it more like the Netherlands. Its government delivers social and economic success. It is based on deliberation and on addressing and solving problems, not on one lot of politicians poking the other lot in the eye in displays of misguided partisanship. It is open-minded about the best way from A to B. And it seems to please the people it serves.” ■

www.essex.ac.uk/government

In defence of politics

Speaking up for the politicians at a time of endemic public distrust

IT IS PROBABLY something of an understatement to suggest that 2011 was not a good year for British democracy. The impact of the austerity measures, the unfolding of the phone-hacking scandal and the riots that swept across the country in summer 2011 – to mention just a few key issues – each in their own way paint a sorry picture of a failing and disconnected political system. The latest British Social Attitudes Survey suggests that large sections of the public are more distrustful, disengaged, sceptical and disillusioned with politics than ever before. ‘Politics’, for the many rather than just a few, has become a dirty word conjuring up notions of sleaze, corruption, greed and inefficiency.

The British public is not alone in holding such views. A cross-national European survey by ICM in March 2011 found that only six per cent of people trust politicians and only nine per cent believe that politicians act with honesty or integrity. Some degree of public scepticism of politicians is a healthy element of democratic life, but scepticism seems to have slipped into corrosive cynicism. The social survey data suggest that something is wrong: that democratic politics is either under-performing or that citizens are expecting too much, or possibly both.

Let me be the person who dares to put his head above the parapet and speak in defence of politics. Let me argue against the current anti-political sentiment and state in no uncertain terms that the vast majority of MPs and local councillors are overworked and underpaid, that public servants generally do a fantastic job in the face of huge pressures, and that, most broadly, politics delivers far more than most people acknowledge or understand.

SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE

The time has come to stand up and fight back in the name of politics. I am not arguing that democratic politics as we know it is perfect, that reform of some kind might not be necessary, or that the MPs’ expenses scandal did not reveal some politicians acting in a completely immoral and possibly illegal manner. But I will not let the behaviour of a few destroy the achievements of the many. Although imperfect, we can do much worse than honour ‘mere politics’. Indeed we must examine very carefully the claims of those who would do better, or who would apparently turn their backs on politics completely.

Let me stick my neck out even further and suggest that the public has become

politically decadent in its expectations about what politics should deliver and how politicians should behave. This contemporary climate of anti-politics is arguably rooted in a generation that has become complacent and parochial, and in doing so has forgotten the alternatives to democratic politics. Those who argue that democratic politics is broken would do well to read Tim Butcher’s *Blood River*, an account of his recent journey across Africa and the raw violence, corruption and poverty he encountered. Furthermore, those individuals that remember the two world wars that stained the first half of the 20th century might well possess a far more urgent and personal understanding of why politics matters, and why it is sometimes necessary to speak up in its defence.

Politics succeeds because it generally ensures stability and order. It avoids anarchy or arbitrary rule, which is why thousands of people from non-democratic regimes in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, southeast Asia and Africa risk their lives to get into Western Europe, North America or Australia. Compared with them

The first business of government is to govern, which may at times call for the deliberate endurance of unpopularity

the ‘disaffected democrats’ of the developed world have lives of unimaginable good fortune. The Arab Spring adds a new dimension to this debate. In the Middle East the public appears far more optimistic about democratic politics than those who have arguably become complacent about why politics matters. The fact that a young unemployed man felt he had no choice but to set himself on fire in order to protest against the authoritarianism of the Tunisian regime underlines the alternative to democratic politics. In a democracy political decisions are ultimately resolved at the ballot box rather than by violence. One side wins, one side loses; but at least the losers live to fight another day.

But let us not be naive. Democratic politics can be a messy, frustrating business for all concerned because it is about producing collective decisions from multiple and competing arguments and opinions. It cannot produce simple solutions to complex problems and it cannot make ‘all sad hearts glad’, as Bernard Crick famously wrote 50 years ago. Yet it delivers far more than many people seem to understand. The simple fact is that what we obtain too cheaply we tend to esteem too lightly, and my concern is that too many disaffected democrats take what politics delivers for granted.

‘Politics’ is not some strange activity conducted by ‘them’ rather than ‘us’. The fruits of democracy are best seen through the lens of ‘everyday politics’: in the schools and hospitals,



on the roads and the trains, in the courts and the shops, in community groups and social protests, in bars and sports clubs, in work and play, and, most of all, in the freedom to question and challenge. From the nursery to the nursing home ‘everyday’ politics improves people’s lives.

CONVICTION AND COURAGE

However, as part of this fight back politicians urgently need to rediscover the moral nerve and capacity to speak with the authority and weight of their predecessors. At the heart of this rediscovery must be the acceptance that “the first business of government is to govern” as Churchill put it, “which may at times call for the deliberate endurance of unpopularity”.

The public are not stupid. They understand that the financial situation is not good and that significant cuts within the public sector will have to be made, just as they are aware that responding to climate change is likely to require lifestyle changes. But politicians must be willing to demonstrate courage and an appetite to speak with emotion, clarity and direction. They need to be confident about what they believe is true, set out their agenda and not be buffeted by the next day’s headlines or focus groups. Political leadership – nothing more, nothing less.

Speaking in defence of politics is not easy. The anti-political climate has reached such a level that anyone daring to stand up for politicians or political processes risks being immediately labelled as irrational or, worse, as

Digging for gold on the internet

Why has personal data become everyone else's property?

FORTY YEARS AGO, in what we may now consider the stone age of computing, computers were the size of rooms and required specially-trained personnel to operate them. They resided in dedicated computing centres and transferring data was only possible by physically copying it to and from magnetic tapes. Yet even then, there were far-sighted initiatives in European countries to legislate for the protection of personal data with data protection legislation first introduced in Sweden in 1973, Germany in 1977 and France in 1978; Britain followed in 1984.

Today, we live in a different world. How existing data protection systems are coping with the challenge of 'ubiquitous computing' (literally, computing everywhere) has been the subject of research by Dr Andreas Busch, then at the University of Oxford and now Professor of Politics at the University of Göttingen.

Personal data has proliferated in a way that was probably unimaginable back in the 1970s. We all now leave data traces, whether we use mobile phones, the internet, or an ATM; if we book a flight or shop using a customer loyalty card. Lots of highly personal data about us exists in our GP's practice, at the tax office and in the files of the companies we patronise, and as it's cheap to store and process, it allows very detailed portraits of us and the lives we live.

Opinion is divided on who should have access to this data and for what purposes. Some see it as a valuable resource, the 'oil

of the internet' and 'the new currency of the digital world' providing profitable business opportunities (EU commissioner Kuneva); others, such as the civil rights campaign group Liberty, insist that what is personal should remain so, and link questions of privacy to civil liberties, demanding special protection for them. While the former call for existing regulations to be relaxed, the latter want more regulation and increased protection of CCTV and DNA data, for example. Variations exist across countries in the degree of regulatory power that information or privacy commissioners enjoy. In European countries

they possess a varying, but overall considerable degree of influence, but in the US there is no personal data protection agency at all – the only such OECD country not to have one.

If these regulators exist, to what degree should they be given a mandate to guarantee the protection of personal

data? Should they be allowed to override or block parliamentary decisions? Similar powers have been granted to agencies such as independent central banks, so there is a precedent. Or should privacy commissioners' power be restricted to arguing their case in public discourse? Should power instead rest with individuals, with a right to 'opt out' or veto the use of their personal data by state or commercial interests? These are only a few of the positions that could surface in future debates about the use of personal data. ■

www.politics.ox.ac.uk



Despite current public scepticism, Matthew Flinders argues that we have much to appreciate in our national political scene

harbouring political ambitions themselves. I harbour no ambitions within party politics but can no longer stand on the sidelines and watch a noble profession – public service interwoven with a belief in the capacity of collective endeavour – be the constant focus of ridicule and derision. Especially when anti-political arguments are commonly deployed as a Trojan horse for market-based solutions that risk deconstructing a public sphere that we have spent a century building.

Almost half a century ago Bernard Crick wrote *In Defence of Politics* as a sharp and thoughtful rejoinder to those who would decry the achievements and principles of democratic politics. His argument is even more relevant today. Sing out in praise of politics! ■

www.shef.ac.uk/politics/staff/matthewflinders



PROFESSOR MATTHEW FLINDERS
Department of Politics, at the University of Sheffield. Professor Flinders' series In Defence of Politics was broadcast on BBC

Radio 4 in September 2011, and his book of the same title is available from Oxford University Press



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Are controversial reforms hampering or supporting urban growth?



Localism versus growth

Planning reform and the prospects for urban economic recovery

WHAT ROLE MIGHT cities play in delivering renewed economic growth? And will the coalition government's desire to decentralise powers from central to local government help or hinder its growth ambitions?

According to Professor Henry Overman, director of the ESRC Spatial Economics Research Centre at the London School of Economics, while decentralisation may enable local leaders to improve economic performance, it also creates issues for central government – especially in policy areas where local leaders are unwilling or unable to take actions that benefit growth.

Unfortunately for the coalition, there is limited evidence of a direct link

between decentralisation to local government and improved economic outcomes. One thing is certain: decentralisation limits central government's ability to determine urban policy. The coalition's approach is to combine decentralisation with incentives for growth. But getting the balance right is difficult, something that is particularly apparent in the government's hugely controversial reforms of the planning system.

The planning system co-ordinates the expansion and redevelopment that is crucial for city growth. But in many

areas the current planning rules work primarily to constrain not co-ordinate.

Ministers aim to tackle these issues with a presumption in favour of time-sustainable development, incentives for local councils to adopt pro-growth planning frameworks, dropping brownfield targets and piloting land auctions.

But the extent to which these changes will be successful remains unknown. For example, it is not clear that the financial incentives will provide enough revenue to affect councils' development stance. Ministers have also

The coalition's approach is to combine decentralisation with incentives for growth

retained 'greenbelts', which prevent cities from expanding outwards. In London, height restrictions prevent developers from building upwards. Heritage restrictions, planning delays and uncertainty further increase the costs of development, while building and other regulations add substantially to the costs of permitted development. Of course, these policies have benefits but they impose important costs for firms, particularly in terms of high prices for land.

Planning also affects the supply and cost of housing. In successful cities, low levels of house building mean that prices rise quickly as the local economy expands, choking off growth and preventing people from sharing in its benefits. Past regional plans have tried to force local areas to build more housing. But existing homeowners, who will lose out when local prices fall, have few reasons to say yes to development.

BARRIERS TO DEVELOPMENT

The coalition favours decentralisation, coupled with incentives to permit new house building. But giving residents more say in planning decisions may reinforce anti-development tendencies that they already express through the ballot box. These tendencies are likely to be higher in successful areas and, as yet, there is little evidence that the New Homes Bonus incentive will be sufficient to outweigh them.

Local government finance provides a further barrier to development. Grant formulas are slow to respond to population changes, which means that local authorities lose in the years following development. The problem is more severe for commercial development where local authorities incur costs that are never returned through changes to funding.

The government is trying to address these issues through the New Homes Bonus, 'tax increment financing' and changes to business rates. But it is unclear whether these changes will remove the fiscal disincentives – and the electoral disincentives remain large.

Of course, commercial development, home-building and local government finance are not the only questions to be addressed when thinking about what policy might do to drive growth in cities. Policies on skills, innovation and transport all matter too. But as Professor Overman says, planning and local government finance are the key areas where two central government aims – growth and decentralisation – most clearly come into conflict. No wonder the proposed reforms are proving so controversial. ■

www.spataleconomics.ac.uk

The myth of the Brussels bureaucrats

New research challenges many popular assumptions and issues relating to the European Commission's workforce

THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION is an important and influential organisation. Not only does it occupy a central role in the European Union, but the effects of its actions are felt in the domestic politics and policy of the member states, and far beyond. Because of its role and responsibilities, the Commission has attracted considerable academic attention, yet many key issues relating to the characteristics of the organisation and the people who work for it remain unaddressed.

Conducted by a multinational team of researchers, The European Commission in Question project has examined the background and beliefs of officials, how the organisation works internally, and how it has responded to the challenges of administrative reform and enlargement. Rather than relying on secondary sources, the team created original primary material based on one of the largest surveys of Commission officials ever carried out by external researchers, as well as a programme of follow-up interviews. It canvassed opinion across the organisation, and spoke to those who work for it at all levels. An online questionnaire was completed by

almost 2,000 officials and the team conducted more than 200 interviews.

The results refute many of the accepted wisdoms about the Commission that are common both to popular understanding of the organisation and the academic literature. The project finds, for example, that the Commission's workforce is more diverse in terms of educational and professional background than is often assumed. It employs more economists and more scientists than lawyers in its policymaking departments. Contrary to the view that its staff are career bureaucrats with no experience beyond the public sector, more than a third of officials actually come from a business background. In terms of beliefs, the Commission is not populated by an army of federalists. Officials harbour differing preferences about the kind of Europe that they would like, and do not favour a comprehensive expansion of EU competencies at the expense of the member states.

The team are currently putting the finishing touches to a book, *The European Commission of the Twenty-First Century*, which will be published by Oxford University Press in the early summer of 2012. ■

www.uea.ac.uk/psi/research/EUCIQ/project



The European Commission's workforce is more diverse than is often assumed



Many argue for more strict migration processes, but protestors also campaign for the fairer treatment of migrant workers

Net effect

Why is it so difficult to reduce net migration in Britain?

NEW COALITION GOVERNMENT policies are proving insufficient to meet the Conservative party's pledge to reduce net migration 'from the hundreds of thousands to the tens of thousands'. Analysis conducted by Scott Blinder, Senior Researcher at the ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, including the Migration Observatory, sheds light not only on the mechanics of this shortfall, but on the political, legal and economic reasons that make it difficult for government to deliver on its pledge, despite a seeming abundance of political will and assent from the majority of citizens.

First, net migration includes several types of 'flows' that government has little or no ability to control. The movement of British nationals counts in net migration. Yet clearly the government does not constrain the migration choices of its own citizens. The same is true of EU nationals (more precisely, European Economic Area and Swiss nationals), whose free movement across borders is fundamental

to the very notion of European Union. In 2009, an estimated 167,000 EU nationals arrived in Britain as migrants; net migration among EU nationals was estimated at 58,000.

Additionally, international law and international commitments require the acceptance (or at least non-return) of people seeking asylum (at least until the validity of their claim can be determined). Family migrants have strong claims on human rights grounds as well. Less widely recognised, but perhaps most important, migration is driven not only by a 'supply' of migrants wishing to come to Britain, but also by 'demand' for migrants, particularly workers and students. As Martin Ruhs and Bridget Anderson of COMPAS have

shown in their volume *Who Needs Migrant Workers?*, to reduce reliance on migrant labour, sectors of the British economy such as construction and social care need more fundamental changes to the way work is organised, to the way workers are trained, to pay scales and working conditions, among

Net migration includes several types of 'flows' that government has little ability to control

other factors. And universities and other educational institutions depend heavily on international students for (higher) fees as well as for their less-easily monetised contributions to research – particularly postgraduates in science and related fields – and to the educational environment. As long as these dependencies or incentive structures remain as they are, barring non-EU migrants may open the door to increases in EU migration.

What's more, as many scholars of politics have long argued, policies can create 'feedback loops', in part by creating organised constituencies that resist change. Recent events have shown signs of such processes in migration policymaking. Employers responded to the government's consultation on changes to skilled labour migration (Tiers 1 and 2 of the Points-Based System) with vigorous arguments for the economic necessity of IntraCompany Transfers (ICTs) – individuals relocated by their employers from overseas branches to British branches of the same company. Universities responded to the consultation on student migration with equally vigorous arguments for the economic and other benefits that international students bring. Both groups had success on these fronts, although they did not get everything they wanted; ICTs and university students are wholly or largely exempt from new migration restrictions. ■

www.compas.ox.ac.uk

The value of value-based regulation

A better designed legal system could improve biomedical research

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SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY settings are characterised by dynamism and uncertainty that generate complex scientific, social, environmental and ethical challenges. Legal responses are typically triggered by crisis events, such as the birth of the first IVF human, or the first cloned animal, and they are often aimed at creating boundaries and closing (perceived) regulatory gaps that might permit risk to become harm. This pattern has caused regulation, particularly in the health setting, to be precise and cumulative, creating a confusing thicket of laws, regulations and institutions. But the failure of the law to work efficiently does not mean there is no need for the law.

Research conducted through the ESRC Centre for Social and Economic Research on Innovation in Genomics (Innogen) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council SCRIPT Centre (both at the University of Edinburgh) is exploring ways to improve the formation and operation of the law and its institutions in the biomedical field, with an emphasis on the use of human tissue, including biobanking



The regulation of biomedical research should respond to social change to be more effective

and stem-cell research. An empirical project conducted, in part, in Argentina, has provided an international context to Britain's regulatory system and allowed comparisons of the socio-moral values of researchers, regulators and ethicists in this field, as well as examination of Argentine values.

This research suggests that we should demand more of the law, not only in Britain, but in other jurisdictions where many of the same difficulties and shortcomings are

found, partly because these jurisdictions have copied Britain's health research regulatory framework. The efficient pursuit of 'good science' – methodologically sound science with acceptable risks that has the potential to realise some public good – would be easier if legal instruments and institutions established processes to highlight society's general and biomedical values, and developed mechanisms that reflect and respond to those values as and when they change.

Current regulation is based on a snapshot in time and can be slow to change, meaning it quickly becomes irrelevant. The system being designed would be more reflexive because it would rely on mutual learning from experience; it would be more democratic because a range of stakeholders could contribute to the investigation of socio-moral values, public and health objectives, and ethico-legal aims and limitations; and it would be fit for purpose over a longer period of time because it would be more responsive to technical and social change. ■

www.genomicsnetwork.ac.uk/innogen

Criteria for citizenship

As deportation increases, who really belongs?

RESEARCH BY BRIDGET ANDERSON, Senior Research Fellow at the ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), examines the rise in the use of deportation in Britain in the last two decades. The number of non-citizens who have been removed or deported from Britain has risen from around 30,000 in 1997 to 68,000 in 2008 due to huge investments in the state's capacity for deportation, new laws making more eligible for deportation, and a streamlining of expulsion.

Britain's recent turn to deportation has been accompanied by an increased visibility of enforcement. For example, in 2008 the Home Office signed an 'advertiser-funded' deal with Sky TV enabling it to contribute to the costs of developing and making a fly-on-the-wall documentary series, *Border Force*,

which promoted the work of immigration enforcement officers. But everyday awareness of immigration enforcement is not restricted to entertainment value. Ordinary citizens who are not state employees are increasingly involved in the policing and monitoring of national borders: public servants may be required to check eligibility for services, or academics to report attendance at lectures, for example.

This should not lead to the conclusion that the public are unambiguously behind the recent deportation turn. Citizens may be broadly in agreement with government policy, but its practice can be unsettling. Anti-deportation campaigns are often mobilised around schools, neighbourhoods and churches. Those in danger

Citizens may be broadly in agreement with government immigration policy, but its practice can be unsettling

of deportation are presented as hardworking students, devoted church congregants, conscientious colleagues, and/or valuable local volunteers.

But challenges to state judgments over who can and cannot be deported are not necessarily supportive of migrants in general, or evidence of a progressive local people versus an oppressive state. The language used by anti-deportation campaigns tends to suggest a replacement of the grounds for determining who should stay and who should not. Rather than a 'faceless bureaucracy' deciding who should



With more immigrants come more deportations

be deported based on legal criteria, the claim is that a richer standard of who belongs (often assessed by local communities) should prevail. Yet this leaves vulnerable those who do not have local community support, perhaps because they are from an unfavoured ethnic or racial group, are single, or lack community spirit.

Deportation and the protests that accompany it highlight a tension between the idea of citizenship as involving a shared right to decide who belongs, and citizenship as formal status granted by the state. These tensions are likely to continue at a time of localism and global power shifts, and the contradictions between human rights and national citizenship will become more apparent in daily political practice. ■

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An unpopular alliance

Changes in the electorate mean more coalition governments in future

THE BRITISH ELECTION Study team conducted a large-scale national panel survey of the electorate at the time of the Alternative Vote (AV) referendum campaign in May 2011. One of the questions asked respondents what they thought about coalition governments. A rather modest 21 per cent thought that coalition governments were a good thing, while 41 per cent thought that they were a bad thing (33 per cent said 'neither good nor bad'). So in general the British public does not like coalitions. One of the reasons for this became apparent in the AV referendum study. Two thirds of respondents thought that the first-past-the-post electoral system made parties more accountable to the public, and this was one of the key reasons why they voted against a change to the electoral system. The British public do not like the idea that parties can fight an election on one set of policies, which then can be changed overnight as a result of post-election bargaining over coalitions.

This latter point explains one of the most interesting developments in public opinion since the general election of 2010 – the loss of support for the Liberal Democrats. In the general election of 2010 the Liberal Democrats took 23 per cent of the vote compared with 36 per cent for the Conservatives and 29 per cent for Labour. When asked in the AV referendum study how they would vote in a general election in May 2011, some 36 per cent of respondents opted for the Conservatives, nine per cent for the Liberal Democrats and 40 per cent for Labour. Conservative voting intentions remained unchanged in comparison with the last general election, but Liberal Democrat support plummeted.

TOO MANY U-TURNS

But why should the Liberal Democrats get the blame for the compromises during the coalition negotiations, and the Conservatives escape unscathed? This was largely because they were perceived as the party doing the biggest U-turns and shifting the furthest distance from their ideological roots. The most important U-turn related to the cuts agenda, or the rival party plans for dealing with the budget deficit. During the election campaign the Liberal Democrats were broadly aligned with Labour in arguing for a much slower reduction in the deficit than the Conservatives. By accepting the Conservative plan after the election the party executed a major U-turn on this issue as far as the public were concerned. This was not so bad in the immediate post-election period when there was a lot of support for rapid cuts in the deficit. But over time the policy has become

Nick Clegg has suffered a lot of criticism as a coalition leader, but the public will see more such political collaborations



more and more unpopular as the economy continues to stall, and so the Liberal Democrats are taking a disproportionate share of the blame.

The second U-turn related to university fees. Actually, fees are not a major issue as far as the voters are concerned, but many Liberal Democrat MPs were caught on video signing a pledge never to raise the fees before the election took place. The post-election U-turn on this issue added to the impression that the party and its leader, Nick Clegg, are untrustworthy.

There were other U-turns too in relation to a so-called 'mansion tax' on high-value properties, and on the renewal of the Trident nuclear deterrent. More generally our surveys show that the electorate has seen the Liberal Democrats in the past as a centre-left party, which for a time were significantly to the left of Labour. So the combination of U-turns and a perceived rapid movement away from their traditional ideological base has lost them a large amount of support. This is compounded by the fact that much of their support comes from 'floating voters' who have no long-term attachment to any of the political parties. These voters rapidly switch allegiance when the going gets tough.

An analysis of which voters in the survey were more likely to support coalition

governments is quite revealing. Just under 60 per cent of Liberal Democrat voters in the 2010 general election thought that coalitions were a good thing, with 30 per cent of Conservative voters taking this view. In contrast, only nine per cent of Labour voters thought this, suggesting that electors were reacting to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, rather

than thinking about coalition governments in general. In fact, asking about attitudes to coalition governments prior to the general election of 2010 would probably have been a fruitless exercise as most voters had no experience of them, apart from in Wales and Scotland. In these circumstances questions would inevitably elicit

a lot of don't knows and random responses, as people lacked the experience to make a judgement. But by the time of the AV referendum, voters could speak from experience.

The irony in all of this is that we are likely to experience more coalition governments in the future because of long-term changes that are taking place in the electorate. We mentioned 'floating voters' earlier and evidence from nearly 50 years of British Election Study surveys is that these are growing in number at each successive election. Partisanship, or the psychological

The electorate may not like coalitions, but they will have to get used to them

The need to know

From allowances to allotments the Freedom of Information Act has revealed a great deal about local government

THE FREEDOM OF Information (FOI) Act 2000 lets the public ask for information from central government, local government and other bodies, with local government receiving the vast majority of requests – around 160,000 in 2009. Researchers Ben Worthy and Gabrielle Bourke, from the Constitution Unit at University College London, have been speaking to local councils, requesters and journalists to investigate the effects of the FOI Act.

Their study finds that the Act has made councils more open and transparent. Each year more and more questions have been asked and this has led to high-profile newspaper stories about senior officials' salaries, councillors' allowances and expensive junkets.

There have been stories about councils hiring magicians to cheer up staff, banning Latin phrases, or paying celebrities to switch on Christmas lights. Underneath the headlines, FOI is being used more quietly, day-to-day, by the public, to find out about things that matter to them: allotments, parking and speed bumps. Businesses are using it to keep ahead of the opposition, and national and local pressure groups are making FOI requests on topics ranging from zoo licences to libraries.

But it is by no means perfect. Some councils are more open and more

enthusiastic than others, and a few have resisted and played games. Many councils are concerned it's being 'abused' by business for a quick profit, or by journalists for a quick, often negative, headline. Most of all, officials and councillors are worried about spending cuts and how they will cope with rising request numbers when resources are cut.

In a further change, since January 2011 councils have published all their spending

over £500 on their websites.

The government hopes this will motivate us to check what, where and how councils are spending or misspending our money. The response has been mixed. Some councils have had no interest. In some areas local newspapers have exposed controversial spending on

string quartets or crematorium costs. One official said it has allowed councillors to understand their own budgets.

So what does the future hold? Beyond the headlines people will keep using FOI to help in their own lives. Numbers will keep going up. The £500 publication may take off, as new websites allow people to do new things with the data. Everything depends on how much political support and money will be available for FOI in the coming years. ■

www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/foi/foi-and-local-government



attachment that individuals have to one or other of the political parties, has weakened at each successive election since the 1960s, and this makes electoral politics more volatile and the core vote for each of the major parties smaller. In 1992 the Conservatives and Labour combined took 76 per cent of the vote, but by 2010 this was down to 65 per cent. Alongside this has been the rise in support for minor parties other than the big three. In 1992 these parties got less than six per cent of the vote in the general election, but by 2010 this had doubled to almost 12 per cent. Taken together, these factors mean that coalition governments are more likely to occur in the future as Labour and the Conservatives find it more difficult to win outright majorities.

The electorate may not like coalitions, but it will have to get used to them. ■

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PROFESSOR PAUL WHITELEY

Co-director of the British Election Study, University of Essex



The Freedom of Information Act has helped make councils more accountable for their spending

The politics of food production

Global food sufficiency depends on innovative technologies but also political, economic and anthropological research

THESE DAYS THERE is widespread agreement that the production and distribution of food is going to be a critical political and policy issue in the next few decades. There are some clear – but hard-to-address – factors that contribute to this conclusion. For example, United Nations predictions that the world population will rise by two billion by mid-century will mean greater demand for food. Furthermore, as countries such as China and India become wealthier, their citizens are likely to want to eat more meat (as wealthy consumers typically do), and so there will be more animals to feed as well as more people. And respected climate change models

The world population will rise by two billion by mid-century

suggest that the overall effect of changed climates may well make it harder to grow crops, as rain – or at least useful rain – will decline in some currently productive farming regions. Finally, there will be additional pressures on farmland, for example to grow crops for fuel, or to adopt management strategies that protect biodiversity rather than maximise output.

Research by the ESRC Genomics Network has been examining food security and finds that there are less well-known factors that stand to make the situation worse still. In many parts of the world, farm outputs have increased



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dramatically thanks to irrigation from underground aquifers. Such water is not replenished as quickly as it is used up, meaning that many irrigation schemes are simply unsustainable. There are also concerns about the future availability of the minerals for making fertilisers.

With such complex, overlapping and difficult problems, it can be tricky for policymakers to know where to turn for ready solutions. Technological innovation is increasingly being promoted as an attractive source of possibilities. Over the last two or three years, scientific and research agencies across the globe have published reports and policy advice that focus on using cutting-edge science and technology to make food production more efficient and effective: for example by making crops more efficient at turning sunlight into usable biomass, by making crops use fertilisers more effectively, optimising their water uptake, and much more. Rapid advances in our understanding of how plant and animal genomes can be manipulated have made such advances seem credible, and it can be tempting for policymakers to look to these reports for a ‘technical fix’.

The idea of such ‘technical fixes’ became very unpopular in the 1990s with the catchphrase used to describe clumsy technological interventions that tend to displace problems rather than resolve them. Views have become more nuanced since then, with fewer people keen to dismiss technological



Climate change may make it harder to grow crops in currently productive regions



Seasonal rains are becoming increasingly unreliable in Africa

interventions completely. But these latest reports run the risk of being seen as proposals for technical fixes, placing emphasis on innovations that derive in conventional ways from advanced research institutes.

TAKING POSITIVE STEPS

Such an approach to innovation misses at least two key points. First, it misses the extent to which some countries (such as China, South Korea and the Gulf States) have already begun to make economic and political 'fixes'. South Korea has already been trying to strike deals with Madagascar to secure long-term leases on high-quality farmland. Agricultural scientists may be trying to develop innovations that will help, but political and economic initiatives stand to change the overall picture faster than technical interventions can be devised. Second, many of the research agendas being proposed still offer no (or a limited) role for farmers, development workers and environmental actors in shaping solutions that might be developed.

Many scientists have the noble aim of helping growers improve their productivity, but in the past such ambitions have often been limited or thwarted by local contingencies. Innovative technologies might help to change our approach to food production, but it is critical that research from political science and anthropology be incorporated into this thinking from the outset if we want to make positive steps towards global food sufficiency. ■

www.genomicsnetwork.ac.uk

Making faith matter in the EU

An increasing number of religious and convictional groups are lobbying in the EU corridors of power

FOR THE FIRST time in the history of the European Union, Article 17 of the 2007 Lisbon Treaty institutionalised an 'open, transparent and regular dialogue' between European institutions and 'churches, religions and communities of conviction'.

Research by Dr Lucian Leustean of the Aston Centre for Europe, Aston University, Birmingham, has investigated the role and mechanism of religious lobbying in the European Union.

Despite the widespread perception that religious and convictional issues have been absent from the process of European integration, his research has identified long-standing contact between religious practitioners, politicians and EU civil servants from the 1950 Schuman Declaration until today. Analysis of religious/convictional contact during this period reveals that 120 groups, representing Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Masonic and Humanist communities, have engaged in dialogue with the European Commission. The research proposes four types of relations between European institutions and 'churches, religions and communities of conviction': public-private (1950-82); experimental (1982-90); pro-active (1990-2007); and institutionalised (2007-today).

Public-private relations emerged as the product of the personal religious

interests of politicians and officials involved in the process of European co-operation rather than from a systematised policy on religion. Despite the general view that the Roman Catholic Church was the prime actor supporting the process of European integration after the Second World War, the ecumenical movement of the interwar period led to the establishment of the first transnational reflection group composed of Protestant and Anglican churchmen and politicians advising churches on the process of European integration. This group was composed only a few months after the Schuman Declaration and lasted until 1974. The Roman Catholic Church opened the first official religious representation in Strasbourg in 1956 and an office in Brussels in 1963.

Experimental relations developed due to the decision of the European Commission to establish a liaison with churches and religions in 1982. This liaison became formal in 1990 after President Jacques Delors launched a public debate on the 'heart and soul' of Europe. An increasing number of religious/convictional bodies set up offices in Brussels leading to pro-active relations with European institutions.

A broad range of religious/convictional bodies have set up offices in Brussels

Institutionalised relations emerged in 2007 when the Lisbon Treaty set out the religious and convictional dialogue with European institutions. The institutionalisation has stimulated regular public meetings between high-profile religious leaders and EU officials. The

Commission is currently the only European institution with a direct mechanism co-ordinating religious/convictional dialogue, and there are proposals to create a similar mechanism in the European Parliament.

Although religious/convictional issues remain under the jurisdiction of EU national member states, the increasing number of religious and convictional representations in the EU indicates that 'faith' matters at a personal level, in the corridors of power of European institutions, and in the construction of the European political system. ■

www1.aston.ac.uk/lss/staff/leusteanl



Religion has become part of the EU debate

Peer pressure

Will the coalition government's reforms to the House of Lords achieve a better understanding of the institution?

PARLIAMENT HAS BEEN discussing reform of the House of Lords for 100 years. But how has the second chamber changed since its last major reform in 1999, which saw the end of most hereditary peers? It's got a lot bigger for a start. Membership now stands at 792, or 831 if you include those temporarily excluded. Yet the Lords is still one of only two wholly unelected second chambers in a major democracy. As such it remains a source of considerable controversy, as well as one of great interest. It is frequently regarded as medieval or mature – or both.

A study by Dr Meg Russell, Deputy Director of the Constitution Unit at University College London, has been getting under the skin of an institution whose role is at once admired and attacked. The study looked, in part, at the strength and confidence of the Lords, perceptions of its legitimacy, and the impact it has had on policy by defeating the government. It threw up some fascinating findings, including the fact that the public – surveyed in 2007 by Ipsos Mori, well before the MPs' expenses scandal – held the Lords in higher esteem than the Commons. The public also thought that issues such as careful legislative scrutiny

and listening to public opinion were more important than the Lords having more elected members. Peers, polled as part of the same survey, believed the 1999 reform gave the House of Lords greater confidence because the removal of hereditary peers made members feel more legitimate.

Dr Russell said an important effect on both legitimacy and confidence came from the change in party balance that accompanied the 1999 reform, with the House of Lords becoming a chamber of no overall control. "Under the Labour government, this gave the Liberal Democrats the swing vote, which meant that the chamber had the capacity to defeat the government more often, but also had the confidence to do so because its membership more closely reflected the balance of votes at general elections than did the House of Commons," she said.

In addition, she commented that "the impact of House of Lords defeats – of which there were hundreds under Labour – are shown by my research to be far more important than people had previously assumed. A careful tracking of hundreds of defeats showed that around 40 per cent of

the policy changes demanded by the Lords were met by the government." These were not just on small technical matters, she said, but often on substantial matters, one of the most obvious being repeated blocking of the government's attempts to limit trial by jury.

Dr Russell added: "Many groups outside the Lords see it as a very effective place to lobby in order to get things done. Interestingly some people who you might expect to be in favour of introducing elections to the House of Lords, in fact oppose this as they fear that the chamber may become less expert and less willing to take up such unpopular causes."

Her research is topical as Lords reform is back on the Westminster agenda. The coalition has outlined plans for a legislature with 300 members, 80 per cent of which could be elected. Reaction has been mixed. Labour described the plans as a 'dog's dinner' lacking detail, and a number of backbench MPs said any proposals should be put to the people in a referendum. Tory MPs barracked Mr Clegg, saying it would threaten the supremacy of the Commons.

So it remains to be seen what the coalition government will achieve, and how popular a 'new-look' Lords will be with the public, compared to the existing model.

But research has an important role to play. As Dr Russell said: "Fundamentally it would not seem right to be having a debate about reforming an institution without properly understanding it. The primary purpose of my research has been to improve understanding about the existing House of Lords." ■

www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/parliament/house-of-lords

The Lords is still one of only two wholly unelected second chambers in a major democracy



The coalition government wants to see big changes in the House of Lords

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